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ABSTRACT

The transition from high school senior to college freshman reflects the emergence of the adolescent into the young adult and can result in separation anxiety for parent and senior. In order to support the parents and seniors, a seminar on the topic of separation was given to parents and seniors by a child psychiatrist and two high school college advisors. The objective of the seminar was for both groups to become aware of the nature and significance of the upcoming change in their lives. Preparation for the separation process was facilitated by sharing universal concerns and practical advice, and by expressing feelings of loss. The seminar began with an introductory lecture by the psychiatrist focusing on stages of separation through the life cycle such as weaning, the possession of transitional objects, day care, nursery school, sleepovers, summer camp, and the multiple separations of adolescence. After the psychiatrist's presentation, parents and seniors were separated into their respective groups. Open-ended questions such as "What is the most exciting thing about (you, your child) going to college next year?" were discussed by both groups. Responses were discussed, recorded, and brought back to the entire group, promoting interaction, ventilation, and a new awareness of this difficult phase of individuation. Because the workshop actively helped the transition processes and allayed much anxiety about separation, it has received a wide audience. (Advice for parents and seniors on coping with the first year of college is included.) (Author/ABL)

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SEPARATION: HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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In the second semester of the senior year, parents and teachers notice a drop in the senior student's motivation and grades - Senior Slump. Many teachers complain about arguing with formerly "pet" students. Students complain about "irrational" behavior from parents such as establishing curfews where none previously existed. Parents lament that their once darling children are now impossible and difficult to control. Seniors who are good friends begin fighting with each other. Some seniors confess feelings of both joy and sadness that "they were being forced to leave a place they loved." Senior advisors report the following as not uncommon:

.A senior went to the wrong place to take his SATs and therefore could not take them.

.At an interview, a senior could not remember the name of the teacher of her favorite course.

.A parent got lost driving a senior to college so that the child missed his scheduled interview.

.A senior wore a University of Michigan sweatshirt to a Vassar interview.

.A senior was not considered by her first choice college because she mailed the application late.

.A parent mailed off his son's application without including an application fee check.

Senior Slump and it's accompanying behavior seems to be part of a larger process, Separation Anxiety, from which not only seniors, but their parents and teachers suffer.

Separation is a force which provides growth and development. But as both Bowlby (1960) and Anna Freud's (1960) work reminds us it can also be

traumatic. Though differing theoretically with each other, both confirm the long range outcome of traumatic separations. Whether concentration camp victims or orphans of a war, these children torn from their parents from preadolescence onward showed evidence of withdrawn, depressive, self-critical behavior or hostile mood swings. Their relationships were superficial and shallow and sometimes non-existent.

Mahler (1965) viewed the symbiosis of infancy as necessary for the subsequent establishment of an internal separation-individuation phase for the child.

Blos (1967) considers adolescence as the second major period of individuation, after the toddler, where emotional dependence on others is further diminished. There is a hightened vulnerability to pathology and regression because the youngster often rejects the parent and their support. Disillusionment with parental figures because of changes in cognition and moral views adds to the chaos.

While not as dramatic as Holocaust survivors, or war orphans, high school seniors and their parents suffer separation trauma and our seminar is an effort to provide support to them.

The Seminar-

The evening with the seniors and their parents is held in January after most of the college applications are out and senior slump seems to be firmly entrenched among the class. The bitter, winter weather seems a further reminder of the lethargy and depression that permeates the senior class.

The Dean of seniors author starts the workshop by briefly describing what he observes as the manifestations of a loss, parents and students are facing as college looms in the near future: Fighting to create distance, to make it easier to separate; sabotaging applications to deny the full effort at success for fear of failure; lack of any parental guidance to avoid the pain of their child's leaving.

Next, a lecture given by the Child Psychiatrist author focuses on an overview of separation through the life cycle.

Weaning, transitional objects and even object consistency are explained, and examples are given. Confessions of still possessing old raggedy blankets and teddy-bears foster squeals of laughter, and knowing looks in the audience. Bowlby's and Mahler's works are discussed from the prospective of a need for Bases to refuel before the next transitional task.

Day Care, nursery schools and sleepovers are discussed, again with audience participation. Going away to Summer Camp and the anxiety it causes in both parents and children, seems to provide a number of interesting stories which are told to the entire group.

Adolescence is focused on as a time of multiple separations, not only from family, but from one's body and former manner of thinking. After working, ski trips and driving, a culmination of detachment from one's family occurs in one's teens as the prospect of leaving home for college becomes a reality.

Parents and youngsters attempt to sabotage the task of college acceptance in an effort to remain bonded together. This is more than a developmental process; it is an affective trauma for some where conspiracy is seen in late application and inappropriate choices. Failure may serve to stabilize the family. Anecdotes are relayed of parents who become ill, sell their homes or become bankrupt, just as their child is about to leave for school.

The need for parental guidance to continue in spite of the youngsters large size and own need for independence is shown. Parents lose interest in their high school seniors, thinking their job is over, and feeling a loss of control. But this later adolescence is fraught with dangers. Drugs, Depression, Anorexia, and the tragedy of Schizophrenia all indicate how this truly is a critical and vulnerable time.

The Child Psychiatrist ends his talk by giving several suggestions to ease the process for all members of the family, as this transition involves both the developmental process of adolescence and middle age. Coing off to college is a milestone, similar to 40th year birthdays, Bar Mitzvahs, driving and all other rites of passage. They all evoke separation and loss. Conflicts exist in parents, as well as youngsters about leaving. Seniors have just reached a level of comfort with friends, school and in many cases with their moms and dads. They now have to leave at this ideal of times and parents have to, after possible achieving this wonderful goal of raising them, let go. As Judith Viost writes this is a "necessary loss" (1986).

While visiting campuses, parents realize their own limitations at the precise moment when their child's future potential is wide open.

This is only one of the conflicts between late adolescence and middle age. Jealousy and envy can exist, as parents fantasize what it would be like to be young and irresponsible. Competition may rear its ugly head as parents may try to relive their college experience, by pointing out the inadequacies of their child's choice.

Then there is the whole area of memory. One does not have to be Marcel Proust or Woody Allen to appreciate the magic of past events. Memory is not just a cognitive experience, it is emotional, and certain recollections can affect our present mental state for hours or days. Reliving the feelings our children are experiencing of acceptance, rejection or fear, bring back various thoughts and events to us. How did we feel during this period in our lives? Were we as stable as we would like to think our kids are? Are our memories getting in the way of our child's progress to independence? There seems to be a difference between telling our child the way we did and felt things, as the <u>right</u> way, and <u>sharing</u> our experiences. It is pointed out that workshops like this facilitate recall and sharing thus fostering, as memory often does, development. Gathering and integrating previous successful experiences, help push us to the next stage.

At this time families also need tolerance. It is shown how much easier it is to separate, if everyone is angry at each other. A pseudo-separation occurs with this pathological technique. Parents have to tolerate their child's regression during the senior year, and still promote progress. This may be a regression in the service of the ego. If kids succeed in provoking their parents, grounding and other punishments will only serve to prevent individuation. Therefore different actions are necessary toward the child

at this age level. Curfews should be lifted. All nagging about homework and studying should cease. A respect for the child's competence needs to be instituted even if not genuinely felt. The following year the youngster will be making judgements, without parental guidance and it is important that they now face some lack of structure, and even failure. Most students are prepared academically, but not socially for the wide openness of college life.

Teachers speak of the Sleeping Beauty syndrome where youngsters sleep during their senior year and awaken for college. The psychiatrist author sees this in the context of burn-out, for some youngsters and this is clarified in the talk. Youngsters should also be encouraged to handle their parents in a sensitive manner, at this time, recognizing that they are experiencing loss as well, not just of them but because of the aging process.

The importance of "leaving a door open" is also discussed. The author psychiatrist relates how kids constantly return to their former therapy groups, schools, visiting old friends and teachers. Parents certainly should not move, get divorced or convert the child's room to a Dark Room at this time. A base is needed for refueling and to act as a heaven during this transition period. Like Holden Coufield needed the Museum of Natural History's Eskimos to never change, kids need the sameness of their homes when they return in their first year for visits.

The door, however, can be left too ajar, whereupon you have parents converting their children's bedrooms to shrines or museum exhibits, complete with rope dividers across their entrances. The message remains clear. You

(the children) represent our whole life. We are stuck developmentally. We can't get past the Empty Nest and individuate.

Youngsters should be allowed to call home, but not fly home at every disappointment. Parents should not break into tears after hearing about their child's struggle with grades and fraternities.

In ending, the child psychiatrist feels it is most important not to totally evaluate your success as to what college a child does ultimately attend. Growing up is not over; for the high school senior it is just beginning. Parents and children still have much to look forward to: Both ups and downs.

After the psychiatrist's presentation the parents are taken into another room with a teacher; the seniors stay with the Dean of Seniors. The same open-ended questions are discussed in both rooms during the hour long session. It is the answers that differ.

Both groups, parents and students, are willing to share themselves. We find they not only speak to the leader, they speak among themselves, furthering a cohesive feeling to the evening.

The first question posed to both groups is:

> What is the most exciting thing about (you, your child) going to college next year?

The parents' answers vary little from year to year:

> Not having to go through the adolescent rollar coaster
> Watching your child grow
> Having a younger child thrive

Sharing the learning
Enjoying an improved relationship
A clean house
Able to use the telephone
No soap operas
No sibling fighting
Not having to cook every night
Not worrying about being late for dinner
Not sharing a car
Watching your child thrive, learn, and grow independent

The parents not only focus on what is exciting for the child (growing and learning) but also what is exciting for themselves (a kind of freedom).

The seniors' answers mix humor with serious concerns:

Freedom
Being away from parents
New friends
Independence
No responsibility
New atmosphere
New academic options
Being able to sleep late whenever and wherever you want
Being able to get a fresh start

The second question posed again to both groups is:

What fears do you have about your child/you going to college next year?

Some of the parents' fears seem to echo exactly what the seniors find most exciting. Also there appears to be different fears for sons and daughters. They are:

Too much freedom
Drugs
The structure of the family will change
How will we cope?
What if they don't like it and come home?
Empty nest - "I spent my life being a mother"
The expense
Who will their friends be?
How will we fill the void of those parts of our life involving teenagers, sporting events, concerts, chauffering?

Hopefully, they will not make the same mistakes as freshmen that we made.
I will miss him/her too much.

The fears of the seniors are more focused on social, rather than academic adjustment.

People won't like me
What if I do not like my roommate?
No privacy
Will I be able to keep my old High School friends?
Leaving a school I feel so comfortable in
Leaving Washington, D.C.
Gaining weight
Responsibility

One question that seems to elicit a great emotional response is:

What will happen to one's room while away at college?

The answers vary; again humor is often injected as a defense against the seriousness of the topic.

Parents:

Needs to be cleaned
It will become a study - mine!
The younger child will take it. (His room is so small.)
It will be a guest room.

Seniors:

Mom will clean it
Parents will claim it
I don't care
I will lock the door and take the key with me
Guest room

In the next question we focus on what one group could do to make it easier for the other.

The parents' response:

Give my child a speed-reading and/or typing course
Let go!

Allow them to call whenever they want
In the summer, send them away for awhile to get used to separation
Help them with finances
Insist they get a job senior year
Reassure the children that life will be fine wherever they go
Remind them that they are lucky to have this opportunity
Do not put so much pressure on seniors
Don't always talk about college

The seniors' response:

Tell parents what we are feeling
Keep in touch with them
Encourage them to visit campus
Show them that we are responsible
Don't be obnoxious

The seniors are asked: What do you think will happen to your parents next year? The responses are most reflective of their fears and their ambivalences about going away to college.

They will move
My sister/brother will have more time from my parents
My parents will be lonely
There will be financial anxiety
They will get divorced
They will get back together
Parents will get depressed
They will get older

Other questions posed are:

How will next year be different?

What could your parents do to make it easier for you to go to college?

How often will you be expected/can you call home?

Additional questions for parents include:

What do you think will happen to you when your child leaves?
How will next year be different for you and your child?

The hour passes quickly at which time the parents join their children for a joint session in which the answers to the questions are compared. Many emotions are openly displayed: anger, sadness, and anxiety. However, listening to the common fears: missing each other, fear concerning academic success, and concerns about social acceptance seem to bring the audience together, which sets the scene for the last activity of the evening.

Parents are told to write anonymously:

If I could say one thing to my child, it would be _____.

Seniors are told to write anonymously:

If I could say one thing to my parents, it would be_____.

Responses are then alternately read by the Dean and the teacher. Thus, a typical ending would be:

Student: If I could say one thing to my parents it would be:
Please trust me; you have given me a - lot of good values.

Parent: If I could say one thing to my child it would be:
I trust you to do the right things next year - I am proud of you.

Student: Please don't get angry if I don't go to the school you went to.

Parent: Wherever you go, I know you'll be happy. I am here for you.

Student: I love you.

Parent: Remember, I love you.

Discussion-

Our presentation brings the awareness of the family's separation to a greater intensity. Sharing universal concerns, memories, practical advice, and experiencing feelings of loss all prepare for the college process.

Separation anxiety has been a neglected area in the college admissions process. Because this workshop actively helps the transition processes and allays much anxiety about separation, it has received a wide audience.

By running these sessions as separate brainstorming groups, where no one can criticize what another person says, students and parents are able to vent their feelings and release emotional pressure. People say what jumps into their mind, perhaps revealing an unconscious fear they did not know about. The questions we ask are designed to elicit certain types of responses. Besides asking what excites them and what do they fear most about their next year, we ask about what each group thinks or fears would happen to their parents or children next year.

When we bring the two groups back together and the anonymous responses of the two groups are analyzed, we communicate what individuals felt without them feeling threatened. Everyone sees the diversity of opinion, but also the context in which their parents or children are operating. This section promotes understanding and a good bit of humor. It also produces significant areas for parents and children to discuss after the workshop is over.

There is also a predictive and informational aspect of the presentation. Adjustment to our changing lives promotes development. Defense mechanisms help in this adaptation. George Vaillant in his study (1977) makes a case for considering anticipation a mature defense - "a premature but mitigating emotional awareness of future inner discomfort." We find value in our presentation by anticipating anxiety and grief as it relates to separation.

When parents consider the safety factor in the city where their child will now attend college, and students write to their unknown roommates, both want feedback in order to picture a certainty about what the following year brings.

This vision may be helpful and serve as a rehearsal. It may give one some feeling of control.

Graduation and the subsequent leaving home of a child becomes threatening to many families. The family organization may become unstable (Haley 1980). In the interest of organizational protection, a child may suddenly become unsuccessful, deviant or even ill. This is why any transition becomes chaotic, and why seminars like ours are needed to alert families to the psychological pitfalls involved.

It is unfortunate to note how each year, there still appears an entire group of parents who deny the change completely. In answering questions about the future they only see positive consequences: more room, less conflict, more intimacy with one's spouse. The grief is denied, but emerges all to quickly when the child decides to go to school locally, or withdraw prematurely in their first year.

When Erickson discusses Generativity, he is promoting the passing down of knowledge from one generation to the next. It is an instinct and a duty of all parents. Teaching a child is also a rewarding activity, which sustains a feeling of worth.

What happens when this ends? Is it similar to termination in psychotherapy, where the therapist may feel as much loss as his patient?

Not recognizing this strong motivation to educate, may lead to sabotage, in order to keep a child around to serve as the "pupil" in the family. This is more than power. It is related to the structuring of time. For years a parent may have maintained their very existence by watching, playing and teaching their child. There now is a void. It is more than an empty nest. It can become an empty life.

This need to parent, of course, does not really end with college, in a family that doesn't disown their child for leaving them. Guidance continues in a modified manner, where suggestion replaces orders, and advice may even be given back to parents.

The nature of child-parent consultation at the college level changes without the parent hopefully being left out.

This sense of exclusion which parents feel is a product of their own experiences of rejection and need not occur with a child going away to college. A parent needs to continue to be part of a child's life even while away. The youngster may be angry at having to grow up, and leave and inclusion and interaction may be difficult, but if the parent

remembers the toddler or even the early adolescent, struggling for independence while being quite dependent, all of which promoted chaos, the college process may go easier.

From follow up contacts, it appears that the first year of college is a continuation of the senior separation process.

Rituals need to be observed during this year as well. They include Sunday telephone calls, parents' weekend, home for Thanksgiving, and stressful contacts during finals week.

We have been told many times how our insights on keeping even the external environment (one's room) the same was most helpful. The re-fueling of Mahler does not just relate to the 2 year old. College freshmen need secure bases as well. In fact, space and money are discussed a great deal in our seminar. The method used in changing a room usually from the sole possession of a youngster to a "family" room symbolizes the manner in which separation will be handled. Quickly converting a child's room to a guest, or sitting room may be an expression of anger that the child left, - O.K!, we are now throwing you out.

If done gradually, which the authors recommend, and the space becomes converted into a painting, sewing or writing room, it not only allows time for the child to return to their space, but it shows how the parents will now utilize freed up time.

Money or lack of it, despite the realities of the cost of a college education, can indicate the deprivation parents are feeling at the perceived

loss of their child. When there isn't enough, is it money or emotional energy that is being focused on? Parents may use money as their last links of control. Instead of utilizing it to help promote independence, it is used to dominate, create anger, and avoid feelings of loss.

Discussions ensue in our seminars about: How much less costly it would be to go to a local school; not go away at first, but work after high school to earn money; and how as parents there was no financial planning for college. These are all realistic proposals and concerns on the surface, but when you consider that the seminar is conducted in a private school with a high tuition, with sophisticated parents, who have already made sacrifices for their kids' education, money or lack of it may be being used to halt separation.

In the four years we have been giving this workshop, we have had fewer complaints from teachers about senior slump. In fact, we now consider how Bowlby's 3 phases of behavior after separation,may apply to the entire college process where <u>protest</u> can be equated with the delay and sabotaging of applications and essays. <u>Despair</u> parallels Senior Slump - immobilization and sadness. <u>Detachment</u> goes on through the first year of college with constant ambivalencies and testing, and eventual loss of contact. Seniors and parents also seem to have a better understanding of the process they are going through. The workshop has often acted as a breakthrough so that parents and children can talk with each other about their fears, anxieties and joys. Parents and seniors seem to express less anger towards each other and can deal with separation in a more positive manner. Parents and

seniors often begin planning for the next year, with parents teaching children how to write checks and keep accounts, how to cook and do laundry and even how to pay bills. Parents and seniors learn to celebrate this important stage in each of their development.

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